

Dispatch announcing a Royal Decree of Carlos III (1780)

Imposing a Tax on the Indigenous
People of Guatemala to Finance
the American Independence War

[Introductory letter—signed by José de Gálvez, Secretary of the Council of the Indies, and addressed to the Mercedarian friars of Guatemala—announcing a Royal Decree, issued by Carlos III, King of Spain, on August 17, 1780, imposing a tax of 1 peso on the indigenous people of the Spanish colonies to finance the war against England, which Spain and France were then waging in America to secure the independence of the Thirteen Colonies. Autographed by José de Gálvez, Secretary of the Council of the Indies, and addressed to the Superior of the Order. Printed in *quarto*, 15 x 22 cm, in excellent state of preservation. The aforementioned Royal Decree, which must have originally been attached to the letter, was printed in Madrid, at the printing press of Pedro Marín in 1780, of which only a few copies remain in the world, one of them in at the Biblioteca Nacional de Perú, here reproduced.]

An unexpected historiographical shift in recent decades, promoted by American scholars, many of them of Latino origin, is highlighting the significant role of Hispanics and Central American Indigenous peoples in the American Revolution. The political and cultural implications of that intellectual policy on the perennial struggle about the *American Identity* immediately catch the eye.

This document, offered for sale here, evokes a series of issues and problems linked to the germinal stage of the independence of the United States, a process in which Spain, as an enemy of England, played a significant role. This *quarto* sheet containing an original dispatch, signed by José Bernardo de Gálvez y Gallardo (1720-1787), right-hand man of King Carlos III of Spain and Secretary of the Office of the Indies, is addressed to the Provincial Superior of the Mercedarian Order in Guatemala. It announces a Royal Decree, presumably also enclosed at the same time, by which Carlos III ordered the indigenous peoples of all America to contribute exceptionally—in their capacity and duty as subjects—to finance the costs of the war against England, waged by Spain primarily on three fronts: in England's American colonies, in the European Atlantic, and in India.

José or Joseph de Gálvez was one of the most prominent Spanish politicians of his generation and a historical figure of paramount importance. Among the many positions Gálvez held and titles he obtained, let us highlight here only his role as Secretary of the Indies, from which he

knowingly implemented the so-called “Bourbon Reforms,” a set of liberal measures aimed at increasing productivity and trade in the colonies, while also seeking greater tax revenue for the Crown, one of his obsessions.

Unlike other Spanish politicians, Gálvez, at the time he signed our document, possessed the advantageous experience of having served as Visitador (Inspector) in the Viceroyalty of New Spain (today Mexico and Central American countries). He was therefore intimately familiar with all the mechanisms of tax evasion and the difficulties of colonial administration. In what are now California, Arizona, New México and Texas, in fact, Gálvez led a bloody war against the Seris, the Southern Paiutes, and the Apaches, and became bogged down for over a month in a dispute with indigenous people of Sonora, who, hidden in the hills, fiercely resisted with guerrilla warfare. His ruthlessness and severity are also remembered: within the framework of these complex processes, as Visitador, he ordered some eighty executions, through which royal authority emerged strengthened and that of the viceroys weakened.

His geopolitical vision was unique, capable of foreseeing future scenarios. In the few years he spent in America, he foresaw the future advance of the Russians from Alaska southward, and thus promoted the establishment of colonies in Baja California, including San Diego and Monterrey. He also founded a Nautical School and an Astronomical Observatory in the town of San Blas, now Nayarit (Mexico), in line with the promotion of science that the Spanish Crown, emulating the models of England and France, was pursuing at the time. His role at Court, after returning in 1772 to Spain following seven years in America, was pivotal; he was, in practice, the highest authority for the American colonies for almost fifteen years—also, of course, in 1780, when this document was issued.

The reform of more than forty intendancies, and the creation of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata and the Captaincy General of Venezuela are just some of the political milestones resulting from his impetus and implementation. Throughout this process, unlike other officials, he also maintained a productive balance with the Church, ensuring that prelates served royal interests. His policies fostered the development of “párrocos civilizadores” (civilizing parish priests), encouraging the secular clergy to perform educational and surveillance functions, and he sought to empower the weakest religious orders in the Americas, such as the Franciscans, the Bethlehemites and the Mercedarians, after Carlos III ordered the expulsion of the Jesuits from Spain, the Americas, and the Philippines in 1767, a dramatic resolution in whose lobbying Gálvez also participated.

The language of the document sent by Gálvez to the Guatemalan Superior of the Mercedarian friars, exhorting him to act as a tax collector in the “doctrinas” (Indian villages) of the order, presents a monarch exercising his “utmost benevolence and love” by demanding only a “very moderate contribution” from the indigenous people to finance the ongoing war, unlike what He simultaneously demanded from his Spanish subjects. Between the lines, the text reveals a theocratic and imperial conception of power, concentrated in the figure of the monarch, whose *will* can only be inspired by Divine Providence, and whose commands must necessarily be directed toward the good of his subjects.

The role of the Mesoamerican Church in the machinery of subjugating the indigenous peoples to Spanish imperial power (through the *mita* and *encomienda* systems mainly) is well known, so it is not surprising that the same document requests the Superior of the Mercedarian Order

to ensure that “in accordance with His Royal piety,” the just intentions of the King are duly fulfilled. This envoy, which is indeed dated the same day as the Real Cédula—the Spanish name of the decree—and sent from the palace where Carlos III and his entourage used to spend their summers, namely la Chacra de San Ildefonso (Segovia), appears to be a kind of “personalized invitation,” through which the Secretary of the Indies urged the intermediate authorities, some of whom he knew personally, to enforce the decree.

The data available to date on the magnitude of the revenue collected through this exceptional tax are fragmentary, making it difficult to quantify its success. Moreover, around 1783-1784, documents issued by local authorities from several Central American and Mexican institutions stated that the war tax had already expired. In any case, at least two significant points should be considered.

On the one hand, the indigenous population of the Viceroyalty of New Spain was enormous even by European standards, and the fact that the Indians were considered legitimate *subjects* and *vassals* of the King made them, *ipso facto* liable to taxation—as a counterpart to the protection afforded them by the Kingdom of Spain. It suffices to recall here that around 1770 the diocese of Guatemala counted 43 indigenous towns, inhabited by approximately 300,000 indigenous people and slightly less than 100,000 mestizos or Spaniards. These statistics, compiled by Bishop Pedro Cortés y Larraz (1712-1787), reveal the extent to which tax revenue could increase if the tax base were broadened. At the same time, the document—knowing Gálvez that the collection depended largely on the zeal with which the local authorities demanded it—insists on the need, for its reliable fulfillment, of the goodwill and effort of the prelates, to whom the civil authority delegated such a function.

On the other hand, and beyond the aforementioned fact, the document acquires special significance when analyzed in light of the Anglo-Spanish War (1779-1783), a process closely linked to the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783). Indeed, Spain’s substantial military and financial support for the separatists of the Thirteen Colonies was part of a larger strategy, developed by Spain in alliance with France, whose main objective was to weaken England and even invade the British Isles, the latter objective ultimately not even being tempted. This project to destroy England had been formalized by France and Spain in April 1779 through the Treaty of Aranjuez, whose article 4 stipulated that both states would recognize the sovereign independence of the Thirteen Colonies, and would not lay down their arms “until such independence is recognized by England,” a fact that would ultimately be “the cornerstone of all peace negotiations that may be established thereafter.” In addition, the treaty definitively established Spain’s possession of Florida and Luisiana and guaranteed other privileges for France in North America (mainly in Terranova), Africa, and Asia. Signed by the Count of Floridablanca and the Count of Montmorin on April 12, 1779, it was ratified by the monarchs of both nations the following month.

One thing is indeed clear. The alliance between the American rebels and the Spanish crown is a main vector in the British setback in America between 1775 and 1785. A few issues in this regard are worth mentioning here. To begin with, from the very start of the American rebellion, Spain sent crucial supplies (provisions, clothing, etc.) up the Mississippi River to bolster George Washington’s army. In this context, Bernardo de Gálvez, nephew and dolphin of José de Gálvez and then governor of Louisiana, led an offensive against British positions in Manchaca, Baton

Rouge, and Natchez. This campaign culminated in a decisive naval siege of Pensacola (between March and May 1781), which resulted in the capture of the port city, the main supply route, until then, for British troops in the Gulf of Mexico.

Spain's other most significant contribution to American independence occurred far from the Americas, in the so-called Cape Santa Maria Action, which took place on August 9, 1780, in the Atlantic Ocean, about 100 km from Cádiz, and was perhaps the worst military disaster in British history. Indeed, as a result of sophisticated espionage in several countries, Spain was able to learn the route of a massive British convoy destined to reinforce the Imperial armies in two conflictive zones: North America and India. The British plan was to sail, well off the Portuguese coast, in a single convoy of almost 60 ships, to Gibraltar, and then split into two columns: one westward toward Florida, and the other southward toward Cape Agulhas, at the southern tip of Africa, before continuing on the sail to Asia. Shortly before this division, however, once the convoy was sighted via a well-designed monitoring line established by the veteran Admiral Luis de Córdoba, the Franco-Spanish fleet managed to draw the unsuspecting English convoy closer thanks to a "friendly night torch" located at the top of the mast of the flagship of the fleet, which was smaller in number but superior in firepower. The English convoy, beyond the imprudence of relying on this signal, was not well protected militarily (due to conflicts in other regions, it was escorted by only one warship and two armed frigates), and therefore, after being surrounded by the Franco-Spanish fleet, it had to surrender without a fight.

That episode was, as expected, the final blow for the British army in America, as it involved the capture of more than 50 merchant ships, laden with supplies, into enemy hands. In that same act, one of the largest naval captures in history, nearly 100,000 light firearms with their ammunition, hundreds of tools and machines for various uses, 300 cannons, and some 3,000 prisoners of war fell into Spanish hands, along with the valuable ships themselves. The prisoners later served as currency and a source of other benefits for Spain. The economic impact of the losses involved in the episode was recently estimated—figures that should nevertheless be taken with caution—at around 450 million USD, not counting the geopolitical and psychological blow to the British imperial ambition.

Thus, finally, faced with the question of whether or not Guatemalan Indians paid for the American Revolution, the unequivocal answer of this document is "yes," or more precisely, "yes, they *also* paid for it." While Spain contributed its rifles, its ships, its soldiers, and the blood of its people in pursuit of American liberty (no matter their own interests!), the entire Spanish Empire did so: the Crown, its officers, its subjects.

The corollaries (of any kind) that can be drawn from these conclusions certainly exceed the scope of this descriptive document. Suffice it to say here that any public or private buyer will be acquiring, along with this document, an invaluable testimony for understanding what we still *do not know* about the American Revolution, namely, the role of the common people in processes whose credit have traditionally been attributed exclusively to the *patriots*. A growing and refined global historiographical trend seems to indicate that this will be the task of History in the coming decades, a reason why this and other marginal documents related to the American revolution will be increasingly significant.

Transcription of the Document

DE orden del Rey remito à V. R. copia autentica de la Real Cedula, que con esta fecha se ha servido expedir, para que, à fin de sostener con vigor la presente Guerra (en que principalmente se interesan esos Dominios) contribuyan por una vez todos sus Vasallos libres, asi Indios, como de las otras castas que componen el Pueblo, con un peso cada uno, y con dos los Españoles, y Nobles. Quiere S. M. y en su Real nombre ruego, y encargo à V. R. que por sí mismo, y por medio de sus Vicarios, y subditos exorte à todos al pronto pago de la moderadissima quota que se les pide, haciendoles conocer la suma benignidad, y amor con que S. M. los trata, quando à los Vasallos de la Metropoli, sin embargo de estar muy recargados de derechos, se les ha aumentado un tercio en las contribuciones. Espera, pues, S. M. que esos sus amados Vasallos, correspondiendo à su Real piedad, exortados, y persuadidos por el zelo de V. R. y el de sus dependientes, darán el mas puntual, y debido cumplimiento à sus Reales, y justas intenciones.

Dios guarde à V. R. muchos años. San Ildefonso à 17 de Agosto de 1780

Joseph Galvez

4to

Al R. P. Superior del Orden de la Merced de Goatemala

[The words in italics are handwritten]

Traslation of the Document

BY order of the King, I send Your *Honor* this authentic copy of the Royal Decree, issued on this same date, so that, in order to materially support the present War (which primarily affects those regions), all your free subjects, both Indians and those of the other castes that make up the People, may contribute one peso each, and Spaniards and Nobles two pesos. His Majesty desires, and in His Royal name I beg and charge Your *Honor*, that you, personally and through your Vicars and subjects, exhort all taxpayers to the prompt payment of the very moderate contribution requested, making them aware of the great kindness and love with which His Majesty treats them, when the tax burden on the inhabitants of the Metropolis, despite possessing numerous rights and prerogatives that others do not have, has been increased by a third. His Majesty expects, therefore, that these His beloved vassals, responding to his Royal piety, exhorted and persuaded by the zeal of Your *Honor* and that of your subordinates, will give the most punctual and due compliance to His Royal and just orders.

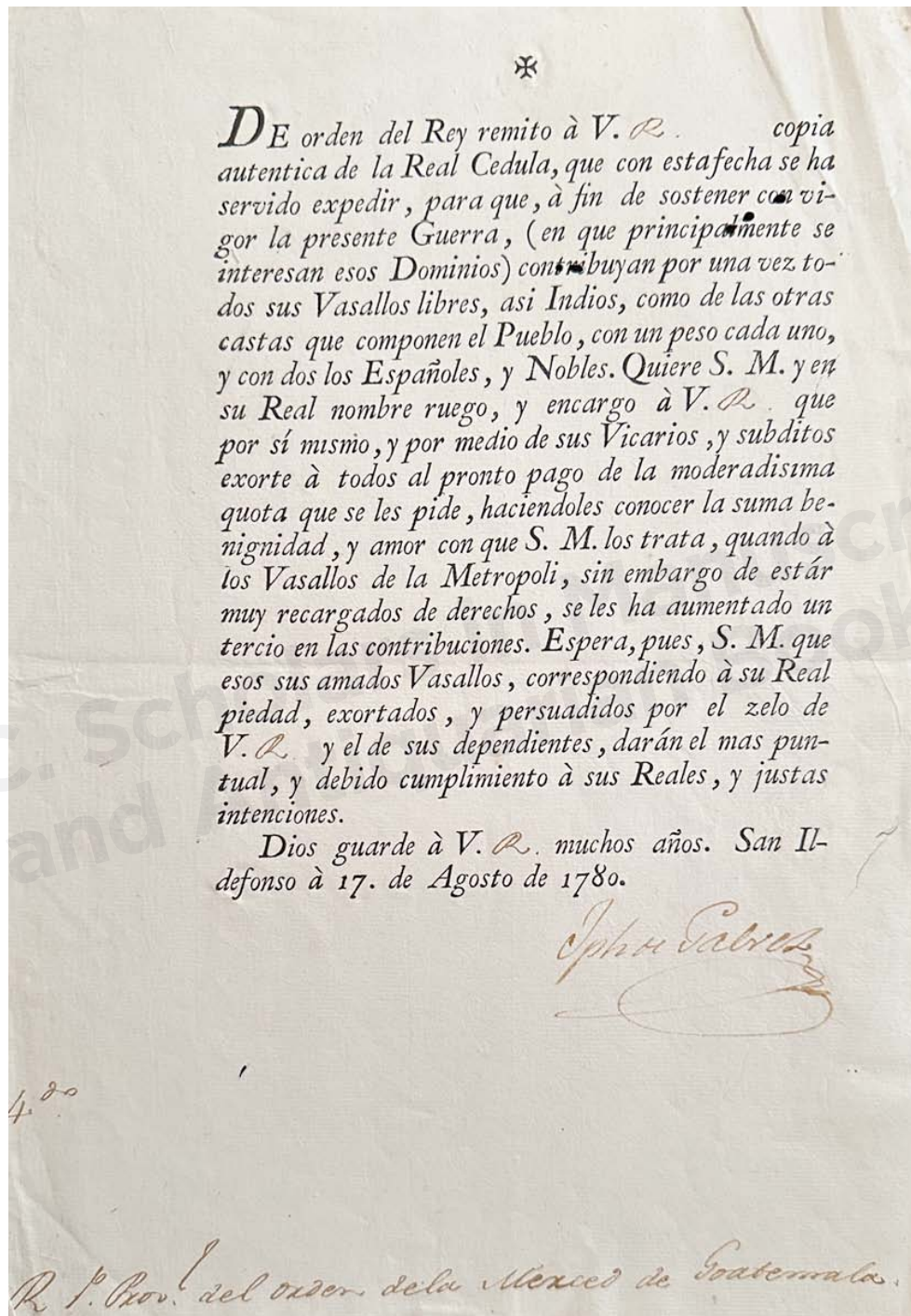
God save Your *Honor* many years. San Ildefonso, August 17, 1780

Joseph Galvez

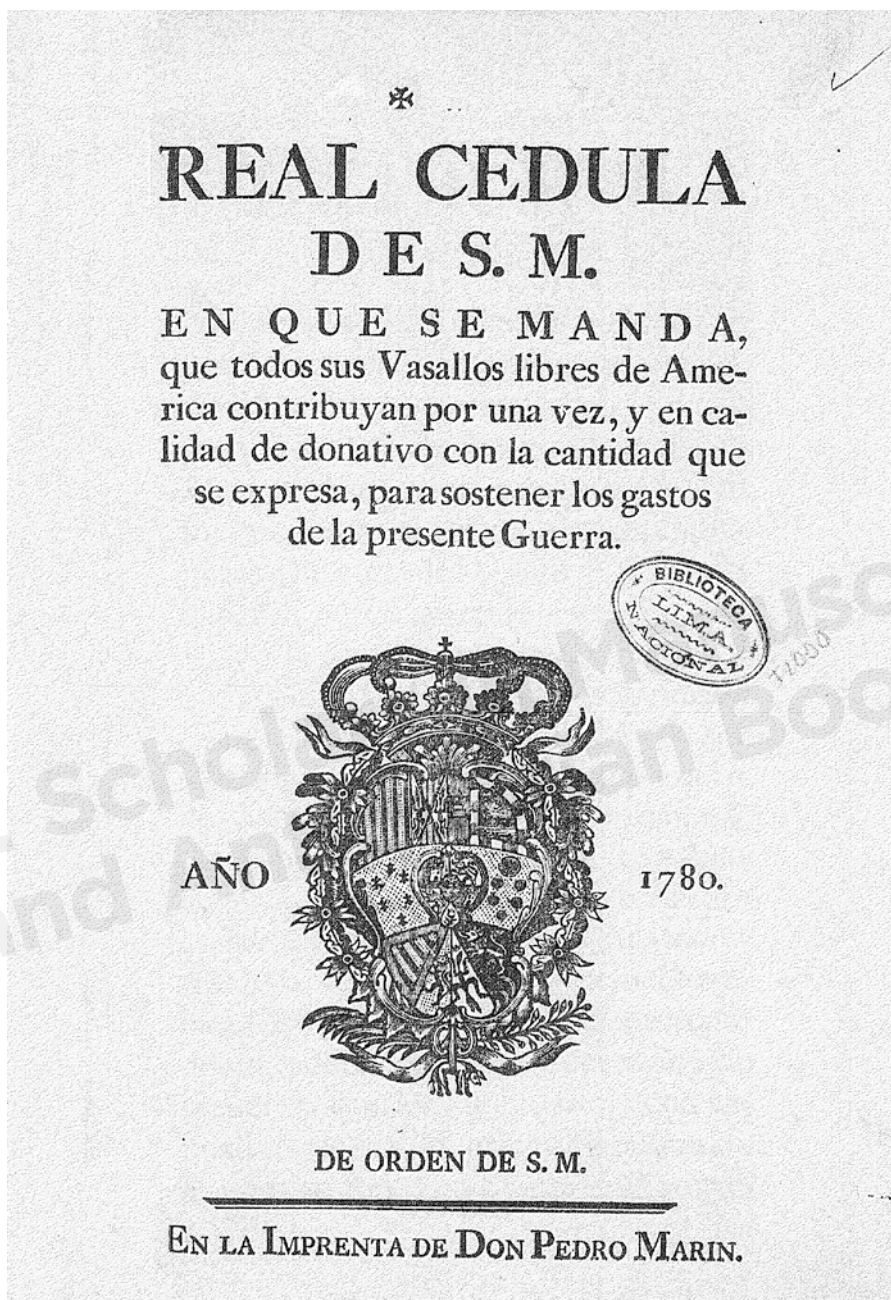
4th

Reverend Father Superior of the Order of the Mercy of Guatemala

[The words in italics are handwritten]



Delivery note or introductory letter signed by Joseph de Gálvez, Secretary of the Council of the Indies, and addressed to the Mercedarians from Guatemala, announcing the dispatch of a Royal Decree issued by Carlos III, King of Spain, on August 17, 1780



Royal Decree issued by Carlos III, King of Spain, August 17, 1780,
through which all subjects of the Kingdom were required
a special tribute to finance the war
against England in the American colonies
(copy preserved in the Biblioteca Nacional of Peru)

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EL REY

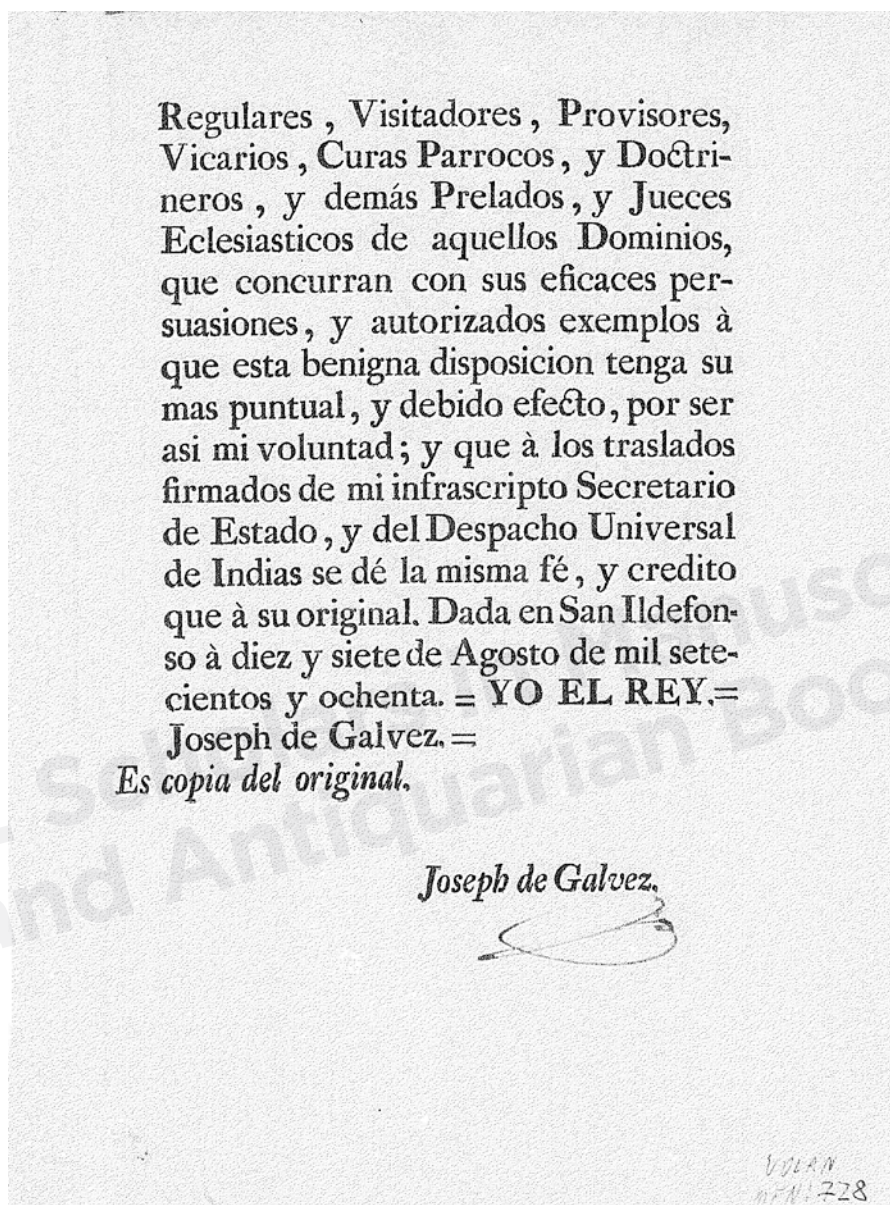


Aunque entre los medios arbitrados para sostener con vigor y decoro los exorbitantes gastos de esta guerra à que me precisaron los continuados insultos de la Nacion Inglesa , ha sido uno aumentar el tercio à las contribuciones provinciales de mis Pueblos de España , no he querido extender por ahora este justo gravamen à mis amados Vasallos de las Indias Occidentales è Islas adyacentes, sin embargo de ser ellas el objeto principal de mis cuidados , y de la codicia de mis enemigos, por contar Yo con los auxilios voluntarios , que siempre me franquea la generosa fidelidad de todos los habitantes de aquellos vastos , y ricos Dominios. Y para que lo hagan al presente de un modo facil y casi insensible , he resuelto , que por una vez , y con calidad de donativo, me contribuyan solo un peso todos los hombres libres, asi
In-

...the Royal Decree continues...

Indios , como de las otras castas , que componen el Pueblo , y dos pesos los Españoles , y Nobles , comprehendiendo en esta clase quantos sugetos distinguidos la constituyen en Indias , y permitiendo à éstos , que puedan satisfacer la quota respectiva à sus criados , y sirvientes para descontarla despues , si quisieren , de sus salarios , ò jornales. En cuya consecuencia mando à mis Virreyes , Capitanes , y Comandantes Generales , Presidentes , Audiencias , Gobernadores , Intendentes , Corregidores , Alcaldes Mayores , y Ordinarios , Tribunales , y Ministros de mi Real Hacienda , y à todos los demás estantes , y habitantes en mis Reynos de las Indias , que enterados del tenor de esta Real Cedula , lo cumplan , y ejecuten , y hagan observar , y cumplirlo con la prontitud correspondiente à lo recomendable de los motivos , dandome en ello una nueva prueba de su amor , y gratitud à los muchos beneficios que les he dispensado. Y encargo à los muy Reverendos Arzobispos , y Obispos , Superiores de las Ordenes
Re.

...the Royal Decree continues...



...end of the Royal Decree

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RELACION DE LAS EMBARCACIONES DEL COMBOY INGLÉS
 PROCEDENTE DE POSMUTH EN 29. DE JULIO DEL PRESENTE
 AÑO, BAXO LA ESCOLTA DEL RAMILLES DE 74. CAÑONES, Y
 DE DOS FRAGATAS DE 32. CON DESTINO á LA BARBADA,
 S. CHRISTOVAL, SANTA LUCIA, JAMAYCA, &c; Y AL ORIENTE
 A SABER, BOMBAY, MADRÁS, SANTA ELENA.

	Oficials		Muge-Pasa-		Total.
	Equi-	detras	Muge-	Pasa-	
	pag:s,	porte	Tropa	res. garos.	
Fragata Cathalina, Mercaderias, y 50. Barriles de Polvora para la Barbada	14..	1..	..	4.. 5..	24..
Paquebot Dancik, Vestuarios para 12. Regimientos, Jarcia, y Lona para la Esquadra.....	20..	4..	19..	2.. 1..	46..
Fragata, Elis, Pan, y Menestras para la Esquadra, es de 18. Cañones.....	33..	..	..	..	33..
Fragata Kitres: Harina, Pan, Carne, y Ropa para vender.....	8..	..	..	..	8..
Bergantin Manie, Viveres, Cerveza, Arcos de Fierro para Nueva York ..	10.	..	..	2..	12.
Fragata Sandvich, Viveres de toda cla- ses para la Barbada.....	19..	..	..	..	19..

Este Comboy fué apresado por la Esquadra Combinada Española y Francesa del
 mando del Exc^{mo} Sor D. Luis de Cordova, en la madrugada del 9. del presente mes,
 y de 6 r. Velas que le componian solo escaparon 6. y los de Guerra, á quienes siguen
 dando Caza varios Buques de nuestra Esquadra, con esperanza de que se hayan apre-
 sado algunos mas.

A bordo del Navio La Santissima Trinidad 17. de Agosto de 1780.

Con licencia: En Cadiz en la Real Imprenta de Marina.
 Y Por su original Reimpreso en Sevilla Por D. Josef Padrino, en Calle Genova.

Three-page pamphlet printed *ad hoc* in Seville shortly after the war episode,
 to publicize the magnitude and value of the goods
 captured to the British in the Action of Santa Maria on August 9, 1780



Por España y por el Rey, Gálvez en América
or

The Siege of Pensacola in 1781,
painting (2015) by Augusto Ferrer-Dalmau,
a currently active historical painter.

Oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm
Collection of the Museo del Ejército (Toledo, Spain)